

THE “CRACKING” METAPHOR IN BAPSI SIDHWA’S *CRACKING INDIA*

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ABSTRACT

The paper shows how Sidhwa's deft handling of the sensitive theme of Partition and episodic fictionalization of events through the Parsi girl Lenny's eyes deciphers the literal and figurative meaning of the title of the novel “Cracking India”. As the narrative progresses, it reveals that her subjectivity is mediated by a community identity undergoing a dual crisis. The shift of power from a British to the Hindu and Muslim centric states of India and Pakistan respectively indicates the end of the privileged relation of the Parsis to the ruling class, despite their minority status.

Lenny is portrayed as a character struggling to separate the literal from the figurative meaning of Partition to reach the actuality of its consequences. When she overhears discussions about the partition of the country, she wonders how all this was materially possible: “India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road?”

The images of cracking, breaking, and tearing bring to the foreground the friction between the figurative and literal aspects of language and the nature of its representation. Lenny as a symbolic observer views how things fall apart and a country once united, starts scattering into pieces, leaving deep scars on the nation, as viewed by the representative of the Parsi community.

KEYWORDS: Cracking, Metaphor, Independence, Partition, Nationality, Community

INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa is a widely recognized writer of South Asia writing in English. She is a Parsi, born and brought up in Pakistan, she later migrated to America, giving her an identity of a Pakistani-Parsi-American. She, in her writings, connects gender to community, nationality, class and religion and asserts that these aspects of cultural identity do not merely affect one another, but also get intertwined, leading to the quagmire of cultural differences and identity crisis. Her four novels—The Crow Eaters (1978), The Pakistani Bride (1981), Ice-Candy-Man (1988) and An American Brat (1993) delineate Sidhwa's perceptions of life of Parsis as an ethnic minority, living either in Pakistan or in India.

The film **1947: Earth**, a 1998 Canadian-Indian film directed by Deepa Mehta is based upon Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India*, (1991, U.S.; 1992, India; originally published as *Ice Candy Man*, 1988, England). It stirred the audiences by its gripping plot and the powerful performances of Amir Khan, Nandita Das and Rahul Khanna. The movie does not include many incidents and characters of the novel but it has been successful in retaining the spirit of the novel. *Cracking India* comprises thirty-two chapters and gives us a glimpse into the events of turmoil on the Indian subcontinent during partition. Historical truth is the backdrop of the novel. The partition has attracted the attention of quite a few novelists particularly in English. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), Amitav Ghosh's *The*

Shadow Lines (1988) and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) present the Indian perception of the traumatic experiences. The Pakistani novelist Mehr Nigar Masroor's *Shadows of the Time* (1987) presents the Pakistani version of the partition. These novels have been written more in agony and compassion than in anger. Bapsi Sidhwa is a significant voice in today's Commonwealth fictional world. Of her four novels, *Cracking India* is the most serious and popular one.

In the novel, Sidhwa picturizes life and time in the Indian sub-continent during the British rule from 1935 to 1947, the period of the Partition of India and Pakistan. It examines, analyses and assesses the patriarchal and conservative-nationalist constructions of the colonial India. In the process, it becomes a passionate historiography that fundamentally rejects the ongoing constructions of the past and voices the "cracking" of the nation into pieces that is unexpected and undesirable by the common people like Lenny and Ayah.

My discussion takes up the encounter between the structures of meaning that characterize conservative-nationalist discourse and fictional representation of the young Parsi girl, Lenny, and her ayah's "everyday" experience in the novel. Conservative nationalist discourse in Pakistan constructs Pakistani citizenship as Muslim and feudal- patriarchal. It pushes minorities, women, and subalterns to the margins. This particular essence of citizenship is disturbed when it is juxtaposed with the network of intelligibility that formed the socio-historical context of Partition and the everyday experiences represented in *Cracking India*.

Lenny as the central character is figured as gaining an awareness of how her interpretive agency can be used as a means to resist these pressures. Her narrative shows how their desires and discontents "mediate, challenge, resist, or transform discourses in the process of defining their identities" (Canning 377). The paper shows how Sidhwa's deft handling of a sensitive theme and episodic fictionalization of events through Lenny's eyes is an attempt to decipher the relation between the literal and figurative meaning of the "cracking" of India. Agency continues to be one of the most ill-defined concepts of theories of post colonialism and discourse analysis. Because deconstructive practice has been so successful in making visible the "figurative nature of all ideology" (Poovey 58), such as the conflation of women's identity with that of the nation, it is easy to forget that this reading practice would be impossible "without the interventions of agents who render them contingent and permeable" in the first place (Canning 377).

As the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that Lenny's subjectivity is mediated by a community identity undergoing a dual crisis. The transition of power from the Eurocentric to the Hindu and Muslim centric states of India and Pakistan respectively points at the end of the privileged relationship of the Parsis to the ruling class despite their minority status. The novel dramatizes the confusions and contradictions that face a young girl being initiated into the norms of her community and society just as those very norms are being reconstituted to suit better a new set of conditions of power. The novel takes an imaginary look into the location of the Parsi community at Lahore as a "conjunctural site of indetermination" (Sangari 872) where the discursive meaning of belonging needs to be taken into consideration for a detailed analysis. The novel grapples with the implications of the end of British rule in India, the rise of the conservative-nationalist imaginaries and their cutting through the patriarchal power relations that circulate in the compressed world of Lenny's community. Lenny's intimate relationship with her ayah and her visits to the Sikh-Muslim village of Pir Pindoo give her an opportunity to move outside the bourgeois circle of the Parsi community and make her aware of the heterogeneous cultural context of her society at large. It shows Lenny exercising agency by questioning the hegemonic structures of meaning that affect her everyday experiences.

Lenny is portrayed as a character struggling to separate the literal from the figurative meaning of Partition to reach the actuality of its consequences. When Lenny overhears discussions about the partition, she wonders how this was materially possible: “There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother’s then?” (101). At a point, when she hears her Aunt Mini talk about “the Mountbatten plan to tear up the Punjab,” (121) she comments: “And the vision of a torn Punjab. Will the earth bleed?... Won’t their water drain into the jagged cracks? Not satisfied by breaking India, they now want to tear up the Punjab” (124).

Lenny’s understanding of the metaphorical use of the images of cracking, breaking, and tearing as literal, brings to the foreground the tension between the figurative and literal aspects of language and the nature of its representation. The novelist uses the Ayah, Shanta as a symbol of India. She makes the Muslim protagonist, the Ice-candy-man, disgrace, humiliate & ruin Shanta (India). She is in a condition of shock and trauma at the hands of her one time lover (183). The treatment meted out to the Hindu Shanta, by her one time Muslim lover is more than a personal and isolated act of violence. It symbolizes the intensive tearing of female honour in the garb of communal conflicts.

In seizing the lost truth, the “other” in history, the text brings out an intuitive grip of the events that makes it refreshingly different from the scores of other novels with similar concerns. The narrative encapsulates with compelling sensitivity and empathy the protagonist girl child Lenny’s initiation in the adult world marked by a highly diverse and disparate cultural climate. The episodic structure of the novel describes within the framework of the larger theme of Lenny’s growth and attainment of some understanding of human situations, the personal, political ideological pursuits, anxiety, pain, stupidity, suffering, joy possessing the epoch before and immediately after the Partition of India in Lahore. The shrewd but sensitive tendering of the past by girl child—its geography of scars, its history of pain—raises doubts about the credibility of the projection of the child’s “point of view.” Sliding into the adult’s point of view, the narrative relates the random history of the female subtexts to the potential narratives of love and betrayal in a mode that enables both the narrator and the reader to discover patterns of cultural significance.

Lenny’s narrative follows the increasingly constricted and gendered definition of nationalist discourse when the country moves towards independence. For instance, it becomes quite apparent that despite the nation’s expression of concern for abducted women’s safety, freedom and happiness, females like Ayah are neither subjects nor objects of the discourse. Lenny’s narrative, however, counters this practice. When the Recovered Women’s Camp is first established in the servants’ quarters behind their neighbour’s house, Lenny assumes “it’s a women’s jail, even though they look innocent enough” (201). The manner in which the women are kept under guard, separated from their community (“There is a padlock the size of a grapefruit on the gate, and a large key hangs from the steel bangle around the Sikh’s wrist”) (201), and the way “servants evade questions as if there is something shameful going on” (201), forces Lenny think that these women must be guilty of some crime. Indeed, while this may not be the way the women’s treatment is justified, Lenny’s naive observations point to the painful anxiety surrounding their sexual “contamination by the Other” community. Ayah’s replacement, Hamida, just released from the camp and sees herself as a “fallen woman,” tries to explain that the women are “fate-smitten,” but this does not satisfy Lenny. She recalls: “I’ve seen Ayah carried away—and it had less to do with fate than the will of men” (226).

The reader is allowed to participate in their cultural codes, allegiances, insecurity, and political and human ideals. The Parsees situated in a metropolitan city of the then united India, sandwiched between two invidiously hostile

Hindu/Sikh and Muslim communities—a delicate juncture, were more vulnerable in the contemporary political context because Lahore had to play a major part in the Partition of India. A period when such massive historical figures such as Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah loomed large, Lenny's immediate world is made of a Hindu Ayah Shanta, with whom she has developed a close bond, Imam Din, Masseur and Ice-Candy-Man, Shankar Haria, a Sikh neighbour Mr. Singh and his children, English Officer Mr. Roger, Anglo-Indian Mr. and Mrs. Pen etc. The narrative in its shifting focus makes us see the scene, hear the sound, and sense the flavour of a highly desperate cultural configuration coexisting in their intrinsic vulnerability, cruelty and ideological or religion-sanctioned logic. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee and English are all seen in terms of experiences that are too versatile to be reduced to a category of funny, farcical, tragic or grand. While fundamentalist propaganda and politics rage, divided loyalties breed brutality and betrayal, arson, looting and the dislocation of common man. A poignant drama of personal loss and agony of young Ayah Shanta intrudes in the larger scenario and transmutes the whole tone of the novel. The awful profligacy, the ugliness, sordidness and deceit converge into an agony and ecstasy that transcend physical and rational levels and expose us to secret logic of human desire and depravity—the ghost of the past embodying inexorably the major character, Ice-Candy-Man. The novel, from being a shrewd satiric record of the history of India and Pakistan, becomes a lore of elegiac dimension that has already been anticipated in Iqbal's lines serving as a prologue: "The fire of verse gives us courage and bids me no more to be faint with dust in my mouth. I am abject: to God I make no complaint/Sometimes you favour our rivals then sometimes with us. You are free/I am sorry to say it so boldly. You are no less fickle than we." The last part of the novel centring on Ice-Candy-Man makes us recognize the teleos of history that has cast him in precarious times. His historical antecedents reveal skeletons on the cupboard of history. In the plight of this bastard—a derelict whom we identify not only a victim of history and his own doomed longings but also more significantly of the culpable, contemptible, misogynistic hypocrisy of the Moghul ruling class that gave social sanction to the sordid subjugation of women to pander to the lust and voyeuristic urges. And, subsequently, it bred a class of male and female bastards, dispossessed and disowned, whose perpetuation of pimping and prostitution in the facade of beauty, art and poetry concealed covetousness, helplessness and deceit. In the case of Ice-Candy-Man nonetheless, there has to be no more degradation. The disarray of history and his own fatal flaw assign him intense desolation but that also lift him to a sphere of spiritual plane. Rejection by his unwilling beloved transforms him into "a moonstruck Fakir who has renounced the world for his beloved: be it a woman or God."

"What one needs to keep in mind," as Sumit Sarkar suggests, "is a vast and complex continuum of intermediate attitudes of which total subordination and open revolt are only the extreme poles" (273). In order to account for "inventionary possibilities adequate to a thoroughgoing politics of change" (Sarkar 273) the critic must problematize the division between the public and private and recognize their complication. In the novel, it is difficult to imagine how female agency contests the structures and practices of subordination in material and discursive practices.

The novelist also focuses upon the fires spawned by Partition. She uses fire as a literary and figurative symbol. Hindus and Muslims, both the communities contribute to the fires of partition. The fires ignited by the havoc of partition spare engulf everything- buildings, human beings, the history, the heritage, the relationships, humanity and human values. All are consumed by the fires of the partition. She portrays the partition as a massive tragedy of humans on an unprecedented level. She is well aware of the losses suffered by the Hindus as well as the Muslims in the form of their lives, homes, dreams and hopes for future. She points to the futility of partition. Towards the end of the novel, the crossing over of, the protagonist, the ice candy man into India in search of his Hindu beloved, Shanta raises questions about the rationale and ideology of partition.

The narrative questions the necessity and utility of the massive event of Partition and discusses the relationship between text and context, the overlapping of the public and private, and figures how agency can shape the outcome of historical events. The entire event leads to an irreparable loss, more particularly of the common people, and also makes space for the unraised voices of the females who had to go through the dual turmoil in the “cracking” of the nation and the young girl’s “breaking” of the patriarchal nationalist code.

CONCLUSIONS

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